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Introduction

At the beginning of the 1990s, a confluence of internal and external factors produced significant conjunctures in the political landscape of Africa. The most significant result of these developments was a revival of democratic optimism, not only across the African continent but also around the world. One of the areas where the democratic changes have spawned visible changes has been in the media landscape. There has been an unprecedented increase in the number, type and diversity of mass media on the continent.¹ The last decade has seen the emergence of various private newspapers and radio stations which offer alternative views on issues, even though some countries, such as Zimbabwe, refuse to ease state control of the electronic media. In Ghana, for example, there has been an increase in private radio and television stations from zero each in 1993 to 13 and two respectively, in 1999. Between December 1998 and March 1999, the Kenyan government awarded eight radio licences to a number of private broadcasters. The Nation Media Group has also been granted a television licence. The number of private newspapers on the continent has also shot up significantly (See Ogbondah 1997:276). These developments stand in stark contrast to what prevailed prior to the 1990s. In the 1980s, for example, all but nine of Africa's 90 daily newspapers were controlled by governments whereas the electronic media were firmly in the grips of the state (Sandbrook 1996:82). 'In Francophone Africa, the independent press only started in the 1990s, 30 years after the independence of various states was won' (Kasoma 1995:540). This expansion and plurality in the media has led many people to believe that one of the critical ingredients of a democratic polity is beginning to take hold. They share the view of democratic theorists like Milton who asserted that a free press advances the cause of democracy by performing watchdog functions over governments, and thereby preventing the latter from appropriating to itself excessive power with which to abuse the citizenry and the political process. The media perform this function by monitoring the activities of governments and taking them to task for any transgressions (Gurevitch and Blumler 1990:270).

The optimism about the role of information and communication media in the growth and consolidation of accountable government, civic engagement in the political process, and the empowerment of the citizenry was given an added boost by significant transformations in the sphere of information and communication technologies (ICTs). These transformations, quite interestingly, were taking place just around the same period as the wave of democratic changes was sweeping across the globe. Various scholars have argued that the political and technological changes are dialectically linked as revolutionary catalysts that will consolidate the 'third wave' of democracy and help extend democratic dispensation around the globe. Since the emergence of these 'coincident revolutions', there have been extensive discussions about the democratizing influence of ICTs. What makes these developments significant is the fact that the technologies are believed to have very powerful transformative capabilities for political participation.

In this paper, I focus on how the changes in the mass media, and those in the area of ICTs, over the last ten years are affecting the relative power of different actors within African political systems. It will examine the effect of these changes on the way power is exercised. It will pay particular attention to whether, and how, they are contributing towards democratic governance and accountability on the part of state officials and institutions. Has the remarkable progress in media proliferation and diversity over the last few years been accompanied by a commensurate expansion in democratic expression, monitoring of the state, and state responsiveness? That is, which voices get articulated; whose interests are promoted and heard; and what is the level of responsiveness that is demonstrated, by those who are in charge of the state apparatus, towards demands for democratic governance and accountability.

The media should not be exempt from accountability if they are to be seen as responsible and veritable champions of democratic governance. The paper will thus engage in an examination of mechanisms that are in place to ensure accountability on the part of the media. How well are they working? To whom are the media accountable? Are their activities alienating the citizenry or galvanizing the populace around democratic ideals of accountability, fearless expression, fair and objective coverage, etc? Do they serve as a means for pursuing a disinterested national agenda? Do they serve parochial

interests or are they available to diverse constituencies of the polity? To what extent are they available and accessible to the marginalized segments of society?

Political Accountability and Democratic Dispensations

As, at least, the rhetoric of democratic governance spreads around the world, there is a growing acknowledgement of the need to promote and enhance the processes and institutions of political accountability among those who have responsibilities in the public sphere. This recognition is based on the understanding that the only way that the various freedoms, civil liberties, and other constitutional provisions, and indeed democracy itself, can be protected and sustained is when those who occupy positions of responsibility in the state are made to respect those provisions and freedoms. That is to say, they must imbibe, protect, and practice the tenets of the rule of law, thereby eschewing any inclination towards arbitrariness and abuse. Accountability also flows from the notion of good governance, which is premised on the expectation that office holders will manifest behaviors, attitudes, and actions that are in conformity with the principles of transparency, efficiency, and integrity. These political actors are also expected to be open to monitoring by citizens, civil society organizations, and other institutions of the state. As Diamond et al. (1999, p. 1) note, "we are witnessing today a growing awareness that liberal democracy requires governments that are not only accountable to their citizens but also subject to restraint and oversight by other public agencies. In addition to being restrained from below, the state must subject itself to multiple forms of *self*-restraint."

In his discussion of accountability, Schedler (1999) delineates two main strands of the concept. These are *answerability* and *enforcement*. The notion of answerability implies stewardship and the obligation to justify one's actions and decisions in that role. It also obligates public officials to provide information when required and demanded by those who have entrusted them with the functions of their office -- i.e. the citizens in a democracy. Since citizens cannot provide the day-to-day supervision of officials, they mandate various agencies, with oversight authority, thereby giving these agencies legitimate powers to demand answerability from office holders. Apart from state agencies, other actors

such as civil society organizations and the media (which is the focus of this paper) also serve as vehicles for holding public officials accountable. The answerability strand of accountability, therefore,

continues the Enlightenment's project of subjecting power not only to the rule of law but also to the rule of reason. Power should be bound by legal constraints but also by the logic of public reasoning. Accountability is antithetical to monologic power. It establishes a dialogic relationship between accountable and accounting actors. It makes both parties speak and engages them both in public debate. It is therefore opposed not only to mute power but also to unilateral speechless controls of power (Schedler, 1999, p. 15).

The second strand of accountability, i.e. enforcement, connotes the possibility of sanctions by the polity and relevant agencies, if the accounting officials fail to discharge their obligations in a manner that is consonant with the expectations of the office they occupy and the responsibilities that they have been entrusted with. The essence of the enforcement strand is, therefore, to induce officials to adhere to the restraints on their power and perform their duties in accordance with the requirements of their office. In the absence of any mechanisms to ensure compliance with the aforementioned restraints and expectations, there might not be an incentive on the part of office holders to engage in self-restraint, pursue efficacious decisions, and embark on efficient courses of action. In short, officials need to know that their (in)actions have consequences that may not always be pleasant. It is important to point out that sanctions are not always necessarily administered by judicial means. They may take the form of outward expressions of disapproval by those to whom officials are accountable. While criminal negligence or action may result in prosecutory action by authorized agencies, for example, failure of a government to meet its obligations and the expectations of the citizenry may result in electoral defeat. Having outlined the basic principles of accountability, the following section will explore the contribution of African media towards political accountability and the articulation of multiple voices. These efforts are important in ensuring that accountability is not construed narrowly by politicians in order to cater to certain parochial and powerful interests, but that it elicits responsiveness on their part towards all members of the polity.

Media, Voice and Political Accountability

Following the 'triumph' of democratic forces in the late 1980s and early 1990s, there was renewed hope that Africa would once again see the rejuvenation of the mass media as 'watch dogs' over the political establishment and as the market place for trading in ideas. This optimism was shared by Bourgault (1995:206) who described the media as 'moving to 'smash the golden calves of dictators and overturn the tablets of law' which have kept the press in bondage.' After all, 'it is difficult to conceive of any consolidated democracy which does not include a widely valued and efficacious party system and communications media. They constitute bell wethers of democracy' (Sandbrook 1996:70).

Democratic theorists like Milton, for example, asserted that a free press advances the cause of democracy by performing watchdog functions over governments, and thereby preventing the latter from appropriating to itself excessive power with which to abuse the citizenry and the political process. The media perform this function by monitoring the activities of governments and taking them to task for any transgressions (Gurevitch and Blumler 1990:270). Democracy is based on the notion of popular sovereignty. This, he contends, requires that citizens be well informed if they are to participate in the political process and effectively play their role as the ultimate decision makers. A free and diverse press allows them to receive a variegated view of issues on the basis of which they can make informed political decisions. A corollary to this is the value that a 'market-place of ideas' has in the search for truth (Mill 1978). A free press, not only allows different views and claims to be made, but also subjects them to contestation. This increases the chances for truth to emerge and to shape politics.

The media-accountability connection is also manifested in the opportunities that a free press provides for citizens to influence the political process. Democratic media enable political leaders to be aware of the mood of society so that they can respond appropriately. As Masmoudi (1992:34) notes, the media in democratic societies are

the mirror which reflects the general orientation of political life and the microscope which allows citizens to pay attention to different national activities and, by expressing their opinion, contribute to the progress of a nation (See also Unger 1990:371-372).

In the following discussion, I will focus on three areas where the media have made remarkable contributions to political accountability. These are: 1) Ensuring that politicians make a commitment to democratic transition and consolidation, by promoting and protecting the principles, processes, institutions and freedoms that it entails. 2) Holding office holders to account for their stewardship of the offices that they occupy. That means ensuring that their performance in the discharge of their duties is satisfactory, and that they do not engage in activities that negatively affect the socio-economic development of their societies, such as corruption. 3) Ensuring that the state is responsive to all elements of the polity, irrespective of their status. A corollary to this is the educational and information function of the media, to ensure that citizens have the necessary understanding of the political system, as well as their roles and rights in it, to enable them make the necessary demands on government. The mechanisms that are employed to achieve these objectives do dovetail into one another and so the ensuing discussion will show.

The African media, particularly the private media, appear to have taken on the challenge of pursuing the kinds of objectives expounded in theoretical and conceptual discussions in the preceding paragraphs. Takougang (1995:336), for example, attributes the emergence of an atmosphere of democratic fervor in Cameroon in the early 1990s to the coverage given to incidents of authoritarian abuse visited on prodemocracy activists by the Biya regime. Sandbrook (1996:71), commenting on Tanzania's transition to democracy, asserts that 'between 1990 and 1992, demands for an opening up of the one-party state emanated mainly from the pages of the newly-established independent newspapers.'

The media's role as a watchdog for the consolidation of democracy has been effectively demonstrated through their monitoring of elections. Their watchful eyes help to minimize, if not eliminate, rigging and bring transparency to the process. In Senegal's 2000 elections, journalists "reported cases of vote-buying, ballot-stuffing and other irregularities that embarrassed Diouf's camp and prevented more extensive fraud" (Associated Press Worldstream, March 23, 2000). Observers of Ghana's political scene credit the transparency that characterized the 2000 election results, partly, to the relatively

large number of private FM stations around the country. The presence of these stations, not only made it difficult to rig results, but also brought credence to the results that were declared. This is because they were able to announce results from their local communities, even before the official figures were posted by the Electoral Commission. Although the publication of such uncertified results raised some technical problems for the Commission, they nevertheless made it difficult for the authorities to fiddle with results, even if they had wanted to. Furthermore, personnel from these stations monitored the polls at the various stations and immediately reported any irregularities, thereby constraining the ability of the government to avoid close scrutiny. Ordinary citizens also used these stations to reveal any suspicious goings-on. In the past, the official channels were the only avenues available to citizens to learn about poll results, and since there were no other mechanisms for immediately learning about those results, there were suspicions that the official results did not always reflect the votes cast by the electorate. The following discussion is revealing in terms of the supportive role that the media have played in defending Ghana's democracy:

"On the day of the [2000] elections there was a polling station in Accra where soldiers started destroying voting boxes," recalled Joseph Ebo Quarshie, president of the Ghana Bar Association. "Immediately, someone called called an FM station and it was reported on the air Minutes later I got a call from JOY FM. ... I read over the radio the article in the Constitution which says that citizens had the right to resist interference in a polling station. JOY FM kept playing my interview over and over. A couple of hours later the soldiers were chased off by voters" (Friedman, 2001).

Electronic and print media outlets have also taken the lead in setting the agenda for various investigative bodies to take up cases of corruption, abuse, etc., within the state apparatus. As one journalist observed in the case of the Cameroon, 'the press is thus like a house-fly: it has a habit of being around when things start stinking. So, what better then can one expect from the press in Cameroon where almost everything has been stinking for over forty years' (cited in Takougang 1995:337). The media have been very active in exposing activities within the state that would otherwise been unknown to the citizenry. The media have been very instrumental in exposing various acts of impropriety within state institutions. These revelations have served as the basis for further investigations by appropriate statutory bodies. In 2000, for example, Komla Dumor, a presenter in JOY FM radio made concerted efforts to

unearth misappropriation of state funds by Ghana's Social Security and National Insurance Trust (SSNIT). "Dumor has been at the heels of the SSNIT, digging out the dirt that has piled around the sweat of all workers in Ghana" (*The Guide*, Jan. 19-25, 2001). In Nigeria, Tayo Odunlami of THE NEWS is credited with exposing the former speaker of the House of Representatives, Alhaji Ibrahim Buhari, resulting in the latter's disgraceful resignation from the position. Odunlami investigated the background of the speaker and revealed in the July 9, 1999 issue of the magazine that the CV that he had presented to the House contained false information. Buhari had falsified his age and claimed to have degrees that he did, in fact, not have. Three reporters of South Africa's *Sunday Times* were instrumental in uncovering the scandal, surrounding an arms deal, that led to the dismissal or resignation of thirty-seven government officials, including the ANC's Chief Whip, Tony Yengeni. The former Chief Whip now faces corruption, perjury, and forgery charges, in no small measure as a result of the media's work. Following eight months of investigative activity by the journalists, they uncovered about the famous arms deal and Yengeni's connection to it. The importance of these investigative efforts in holding government officials and other bureaucrats accountable, has encouraged the World Bank to fund a training program at the African Virtual University. Over 300 journalists, from across the continent, will benefit from the program. It is intended to provide them with the skills necessary for embarking on investigative reporting which will help stem corruption.

In a reasonable number of countries, journalists have also made progress in compelling state officials to bring transparency to various processes and decisions. This has allowed citizens to ascertain the motives and justifications behind such processes and decisions. The pressure for transparency and answerability was very strongly felt by the New Patriotic Party government in Ghana, when it was compelled to explain the rationale for a deal that allowed Sahara, a Nigerian company, to lift crude oil from Nigeria to Ghana. There had been suspicion of malfeasance in the allocation of the contract, and the government was called to account largely as a result of the exposure given the issue by Kwasi Pratt, editor of the *Weekly Insight*. Until his death in suspicious circumstances, Carlos Cardoso, the firebrand editor of the daily fax *Metical* used the pages of the paper to critique what he considered to be the

Mozambican government's blind acceptance of World Bank and IMF prescriptions. He challenged the government to be accountable to the people of Mozambique first and foremost and not the international financial institutions, by addressing the devastating impact that those policies have had.

Through these kinds of information, the populace is able to measure the pronouncements of politicians against their deeds, and hence make informed judgements about the political future of those individuals. As Wasburn (1995:647) points out:

in modern democratic states, citizens largely depend, directly and indirectly, on media of mass communication to provide most of the material out of which they construct their understanding and subsequently form their evaluations of political structures, policies, actors and events [The press] stimulates the public's potential interest and makes available specific information it needs to hold government accountable.

The likelihood of exposure is also instrumental in, at least, making government officials more circumspect in their activities. What we see, therefore, is a certain measure of imposed accountability on the part of these officials which they did not have to worry about in the past.

One very remarkable instance of the media's contribution to political accountability is the investigation conducted by Daniel Bekoutou, a Chadian-born reporter with the Dakar-based newspaper. His investigations, in collaboration with other human rights groups, led to the arrest and indictment of former Chadian dictator, Hissain Habre by Senegalese authorities in February 2000. Bekoutou's investigations revealed evidence of political killings, torture, and 'disappearances' in Chad when Habre was president. This unprecedented indictment, in the context of Africa, demonstrates how the media can help hold officials answerable for their deeds and also illustrates how far-reaching their role is in ensuring that sanctions are brought to bear on those who abuse the power of office.

It is worth noting though that, by and large, the enforcement dimension of accountability is constrained by a variety of factors, principal among which is the asymmetrical nature of power in most political jurisdictions. Thus, we are confronted with a commonplace situation where the citizenry in many countries is unable to hold office holders to account, because it does not have the resources for political engagement with the state. Consequently, political leaders who are entrusted with responsibility for the

state do not find it necessary to render account for their stewardship to the citizenry and institutions of accountability. While they see themselves as responsible for running the affairs of state, they do not consider themselves in duty bound to submit to accountability and its attendant obligation of answerability and subjection to sanction. It is in view of this that some observers have suggested that responsibility is not coterminous with accountability. The former may not necessarily beget the latter. As Schedler (1999, p. 19) points out:

While accountability builds on the modern idea that power and knowledge are separate goods, the notion of responsibility allows powerful actors to maintain the illusion that they know what they are doing and therefore dismiss irritating questions that do nothing but disturb their solemn and responsible exercise of power.

The constraints on enforceability notwithstanding, it is heartening to know that the public is given a chance, through the media's exposure of government activities, to make informed judgements on their public officials.

Newspapers and broadcast media have become a very importance source of political education, conscientization, mobilization, and advocacy. They educate citizens on democratic principles, their constitutional rights, and provide them with access to different views and air their own views. The 'Cross Fire' program on Ghana's private *Joy FM* station, which is an adaptation of CNN's 'Cross Fire', provides a forum for intelligent debates on burning issues by analysts with differing perspectives.² Sandbrook (1996:81) captures this when he states that:

the privately-owned media play important roles in democratic life. They inform citizens on matters of public policy by presenting and debating alternatives. Where parties remain weak to fulfil this policy role, newspapers, radio and television may fill the gap in forging a more informed electorate. The media may also help empower their readers and listeners by making them aware of their civil and political rights, and why and how these rights should be exercised.

Wanyande (1996:14) provides evidence from Kenya to support the mobilizing and educational role of the media in the promotion of democratic ideas. He notes that *The Daily Nation's* 'editorial of 2nd July 1996, provided very sound arguments about the seriousness of the issue of constitutional reform. This had the important effect of at least making people begin to think about the issue more critically than would have

been the case if the whole debate was left to politicians alone.’ Another way in which the media have held politicians to account is by advocating on behalf of various elements in society who for one reason or the other would be negatively affected by government actions. They have also provided opportunities for voices do not have the resources to articulate their voices in dealings with the repressive apparatus of the state to find expression for those voices and to rally support for their cause. In August 2001, Kenyan journalist were again at the forefront of criticism against a proposed legislation by President Moi which seeks ban private radio stations from broadcasting in the country's indigenous languages. In various editorials, they vehemently opposed the legislation which most political observers see as a clear attempt to eliminate the politicization of the airwaves by the Kikuyu whom the Moi-led regime considers to be it political adversaries. Members of the independent press in Angola were also instrumental in exposing and holding the government answerable for allegations that only black youngsters and the poor were being recruited into the army to fight against UNITA rebels. In spite of tremendous harassment by the authorities, these journalists also exposed the forced evacuation of the residents of Boavista district of Luanda in July 2001, and gave them an avenue to raise their concerns and question the government action.

State Response to Media Pluralism and Dissenting Voices

It is obvious from the above discussion that the media have helped to protect democratic principles, held politicians answerable for their actions, and served as a means for advocacy and education . There, nevertheless, continue to be significant constraints that hinder the ability of the fourth estate of the realm to pursue these objectives effectively A lot of governments on the continent continue to impose judicial and extra-judicial barriers on journalists and media houses, in a manner which defeats the professed goals of democratic governance and the purposes behind constitutional provisions of a free press and freedom of expression. Among the hindrances to press freedom are the maintenance of anachronistic laws on libel and sedition, censorship, physical harassment of journalists and the violation of their premises and equipment, denying them access to inputs and audiences, debilitating media laws, etc.

Journalists in many countries confront government-orchestrated harassment when they voice opinions or publish information that is unpalatable to the state elite. In these states, the basis for state accommodation of free expression is not the constitutional provision giving that right to citizens and the press; neither is it premised on the veracity of journalistic reporting. Rather, the parameters of freedom of expression and of the press are determined by how well the contents of that particular print or electronic medium portray power brokers in a positive or, at least, neutral light. Where these state-defined criteria are not followed, the full wrath of the repressive apparatus is visited on targeted journalists, editors, and publishers. This continues to be the case even though there are legal provisions for dealing with cases of unsubstantiated or libelous reporting. Harassment has been used as a tool of retribution as well as to pre-emptive mechanism. Foreign correspondents in Angola have complained about having their phones disabled in the course of transmitting their reports to media outlets regarding the civil war in that country. The latest act of the common practice of harassing journalists in Eritrea happened in September 2001, when security forces arrested nine journalists under the pretext that they were avoiding military service. It is, however, obvious to most observers of the political scene in that country that they were targeted because of their critical reporting. The state's reason for the arrests is punctured by the fact that two of the arrested individuals were legally excused from military service. An example of the pre-emptive use of harassment is illustrated by a case in Morocco. Here, the secret service (DST) incessantly hounded Alain Chabod of *France 3 Public Television* and Ali Lambert of *Demain*, a Moroccan weekly magazine in July of 2001 (<http://www.cpj.org/news/2001/morocco13jul01na.html>). This was to keep a tab of their activities as they tried to investigate recent revelations by a former DST agent, alleging complicity of top government officials in the disappearance in 1965 of the dissident leader Medhi Ben Barka.

Political leaders, who are supposed to protect the civil liberties and constitutional rights of citizens, sets a bad example for others when they violate those rights and liberties. The reluctance or failure of governments to uphold freedom of expression and a free press turns journalists into easy prey for those elements in society who might be averse to reporting done about people, causes, or organizations that they support. Laura Pawson, a Luandan-based correspondent for the BBC and Reuters

was assaulted by a group of young men who threatened her with further retaliations if she persisted in filing stories critical of the government. Brian Ligomeka, editor of a weekly newspaper in Malawi suffered a worse fate in August 2001, when he was attacked by a group of people who are presumably supporters of President Muluzi. He was beaten and castigated for "writing negative things about Muluzi ... You have been embarrassing us. We've been looking for you for a long time" (<http://www.cpj.org/protests01ltrs/SouthernAfr12oct01pl.html>). As recently as September 2001, seven journalists in Sierra Leone, who are noted for their criticism of the government, received anonymous death threats portraying them as enemies of the state who must all die before the May 2002 parliamentary and presidential elections. It is worth pointing out that the journalists have all expressed dissent with President Kabbah's decision to postpone the elections from December.

Arbitrariness seems to characterize the manner in which certain governments deal with criticism. In Togo, it has become routine for the state to confiscate copies of independent newspapers that are critical of President Eyadema. *Le Combat du Peuple*, for example suffered the third seizure in a month when it published a critical report, in July 2000, on the human rights situation in the country which was put out by the Togo Human Rights League. In July 2001, armed police officers occupied the premises of the paper, before it went into circulation, confiscating printing plates and the whole batch of the latest issue. This action, which was based on an allegation that the issue contained material that could be detrimental to public order, violated the country's constitution which provides for press freedom. In Eritrea, the government closed down privately owned newspapers in September 2001, without any substantive reason. It claimed that the closures were occasioned by violations of licensing requirements by the newspapers. The most logical explanation, however, seems to be that the government does not want a critical private press to be operating in the months leading up to the December 2001 elections. An explanation of the closures by Ali Abdu, head of the country's television network, supports this line of reasoning. He told the BBC in an interview that the exercise was the result of the papers' refusal to mend their ways after several calls on them to do so. That simply means that they failed to toe the government line. The closures leave the government-owned *Hada Eritrea* as the only newspaper voice in the country.

One of the most debilitating influences on the media are criminal libel laws that are used to protect state officials from the scrutiny of the media. These laws allow governments to incarcerate journalists who criticize politicians and seek to hold them accountable. Ethiopia has applied this law religiously and holds the unenviable record of having jailed more journalists than any other African country in the year 2000 (<http://www.cpj.org/protests/01ltrs/Ethiopia01aug01pl.html>). In August 2001, the editor of *The Post* in Zambia was charged with criminal libel against President Chiluba for alleging in the August 17 issue of the paper that the president was involved in a US\$4 million graft scheme. Tunisian journalist and human rights activist, Sihem Bensedrine, was imprisoned for three months in 2001, because she had made critical remarks about some government institutions on a London-based Arabic television station owned by a dissident compatriot. Governments that intimidate the media with threats and acts of criminal libel should take a cue from their counterparts in countries, where such laws are seen as anachronistic to the ethos of the new democratic dispensation spreading across the continent. Ghana's parliament, in 2001, unanimously repealed a similar law at the initiative of the New Patriotic Party government, which had made a pledge to do so if elected. Where governments think that reporters have incorrectly reported on a matter, they are at liberty to state their own version of the story through the state media which they control, or other media organizations. The public could then be allowed to weigh the various sides of the issue and draw its own conclusions.

Civil libel suits have also become commonplace as government officials pursue their objective of crippling the media's ability to investigate and expose corrupt, inappropriate, or inefficient conduct on the part of those officials. These suits, and the huge financial liabilities that come with upholding them, are intended to warn journalists and publishers that they are risking their businesses by probing cases of impropriety on the part of state elites. The motivations behind this covert strategy was made clear by the Zambian Information Minister, Newstead Zimba, who stated in parliament that 'the media needed to practice self-censorship in order to avoid libel cases. ... [L]ibel cases could be very inconveniencing to authors' (MISA, Feb. 23, 1999).

Governments have also employed the withdrawal of advertising as a way of starving already cash-strapped private media who do not tie their fortunes to those of the government. Since most of these media concerns depend on advertising revenue to survive, the impact of losing a client as huge as the state can be very devastating. This is the fate that confronted *The Namibian*, the Windhoek-based independent weekly in June 2001. The SWAPO government ordered all state agencies not to patronize the paper or advertise in it. This was the government's way of registering its disapproval with the paper's reportage on the government and its activities. The following revelation about Botswana implores us not to assume that free expression and freedom of the press will necessarily be championed by authorities in leading democracies on the continent:

On May 1 2001, the editors of the *Botswana Guardian* and the *Midweek Sun* intercepted a memorandum in which the permanent secretary in Botswana's Ministry of Works Transport and Communications was communicating to parastatal organizations and departments in his ministry, a decision purportedly taken by Cabinet to withdraw advertising from the *Botswana Guardian* and the *Midweek Sun* newspapers. A week [later] another memo surfaced 'outlawing' purchase of our two newspapers by government departments, public libraries, national archives and other government departments (Media Institute of Southern Africa, *Free Press*, Sept. 2001, p.26).

The same desire to stifle criticism is served by laws that allow choking of information flow on the basis of national security. It is ironic that several years after independence, a lot of African countries continue to retain colonial legislations which were used to intimidate anti-colonial activists, including some of the current leaders of these countries who were critical of those laws. Now that those laws seem to serve their interests, they see the wisdom in retaining and applying them. These laws have been employed, under the guise of the rule of law and state security, to undermine press freedom and freedom of expression, as well as to intimidate journalists (See, for eg., Lister 1996). In August 2000, the state-controlled Supreme Council for Information (SCI) in Bourkina Faso ordered the police to raid the offices of *Horizon FM*, and independent radio station. The station's offence was that it had disseminated information from Le Collectif, a group calling for a rally to keep alive demands for a fair inquiry into the death of journalist Norbert Zongo. Zongo was alleged to have been murdered on the instructions of Francois Campaore, brother of the Bourkinabe president (see Tettey, 2001). The head of the SCI justified his action on the basis of the 1993 Information Code which requires immediate closure of media outlets

suspected of compromising national security and spreading false news. He argued that "Democracy is fine, but journalists have to know the interests of the state country come first ... journalism is not about insulting state officials" (<http://www.cpj.org/dangerous/2001/zongo/zongo.html>). In his view, therefore, the interest of the country is equated with the interest of the political leadership. It is disheartening that a country such as Senegal, which is not noted for clamping down on journalists, is suddenly using sedition laws as a pretext to crack down on those media that criticize the government of President Wade. As the Committee to Protect Journalists stated in a letter to the president in September 2001: "On at least five occasions since Your Excellency took office last April, Senegalese authorities have used such statutes to arrest and interrogate journalists whose only 'offence' appears to be reporting on sensitive issues," such as the Cassamance conflict (<http://www.cpj.org/protests/01ltrs/Senegal24sept01pl.html>).

Interestingly, some countries, such as Cote d'Ivoire, Cameroon, Namibia and Swaziland, have laws which make it an offence to 'insult' political leaders. Such laws, whose definition of 'insult' is nebulous, have been used to punish journalists who make legitimate comments or criticize the performance of senior government officials. King Mswati III issued a decree in June 2001 which subjects those who insult, ridicule or bring the Kings and Queen into disrepute to a term of imprisonment of up to 10 years and/or a fine of 50,000 emalangeni (US\$6,200). In short, the royals must be conceived of as infallible, untouchable and above reproach. The desire of politicians to evade the scrutiny of the media and hence circumvent the tenets of accountability, appears to be at the heart of a new legislation that was passed by Algeria's lower house of parliament in May 2001. The legislation provides for stiff penalties for those found guilty of defaming the president or other institutions such as the army or the judiciary. The effect of such legislation on the media's ability to hold officials accountable is, at best, chilling. It constrains the media in their role of raising questions about the performance and activities of those charged with responsibility for running the state. Journalists showed their revulsion towards the legislation when they organized a 'Day Without Newspapers' on May 28 in Algiers and other cities.

It is unfortunate that at a time when democratically inclined governments in places such as Ghana have eliminated newspaper licensing laws from their statute books, several countries continue to require

state approval for free expression. The purpose of such regulations is obviously to stifle political expression by those who may be perceived as antithetical to the ruling elite. In Ethiopia, for example, the editor of the *Kicker*, a weekly, went to jail for a month, in June 2001, for failing to renew his licence. His counterpart with the critical Amharic weekly, *Atkurot*, faces similar charges, even as he contends with the fact that financial constraints do not allow him to publish the paper any longer. Police in the Democratic Republic of the Congo besieged the residence of the editor of *L'Alarme*, in February 2001 ostensibly because he was operating without a licence. It seems to be more than a coincidence, however, that shortly after the paper published an interview with a former security advisor to ex-President Mobutu, the authorities should suddenly realize that the newspaper had no licence to operate. It is important that the whims of state officials not be the basis for determining whether citizens can express themselves or not.

The State, Media and Political Accountability in Zimbabwe

President Mugabe's ZANU-PF government is probably the most visible example of how the state in Africa is using variables tactics to stifle freedom of expression and of the press. The government has used anachronistic statutes, such as the Law and Order Maintenance Act, which has its origins in colonial rule, to intimidate, incarcerate and cow journalists into kowtowing to the dictates of the government.

In the last few months, the government has expelled certain foreign correspondents whose reportage is not flattering to the government. These include Mercedes Sayagues of the South African *Mail and Guardian* and Joseph Winter of the BBC. The former's expulsion was based on unsubstantiated charges that she was spying for the UNITA rebels in Angola. The authorities have also indicated that they are putting in place new accreditation requirements for foreign journalists, and that until it was ready it seems that there will be no renewal of permits for those whose permits expire. This is obviously an attempt by the Department of Information and Publicity to determine who it is comfortable having in Zimbabwe to cover events. This efforts to stop the rest of the world from knowing what is going on in the country reached a new level in July 2001, when the government suspended accreditation for all BBC correspondents, under the pretext that they were biased in their reportage of political events in the country.

The extent of President Mugabe's disdain for the private media in particular is borne out by the fact that he has consistently ignored or circumvented rulings of the judiciary that are not in his favor. In 1999, after the security authorities ignored three High Court orders to produce two detained journalists, several judges petitioned President Mugabe regarding the unconstitutionality of the military apprehending, incarcerating, and torturing civilians. In response, the president accused the judiciary of interfering with the work of the executive, and asked them to resign, even though he does not have such powers under the constitution. This lack of respect for the judiciary came to the fore again in 2000. In September, the Supreme Court made a landmark ruling in favor of a private radio station, *Capital Radio*, which ended the state's monopoly of broadcasting. Mugabe showed impunity for the court and circumvented its ruling by promulgating a Broadcasting regulation under the Presidential Powers (Temporary Measures) Act in October that restored the status quo ante. This has been followed by a new Broadcasting Services Act (2001). "Although the Act has served to 'open up the airwaves,' in the sense that the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) is no longer the only broadcaster allowed to operate in the country, it has at the same time put stringent guidelines that make it virtually impossible for new players to enter the market. As an example community broadcasting stations may apply for a one-year non-renewable licence. Similarly, commercial stations may apply for a two-year non-renewable licence" (Titus, 2001, p. 16).

In June 2001, the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation axed a new weekly television call-in show ("Talk to the Nation"), ostensibly for policy reasons. The real reason clearly lies with the fact that many callers criticized the president and his government over the state of the economy, and seems related to the

Supporters of the government have taken advantage of the state's hostility to journalists, especially those in the private media, to harass those whose coverage of issues does not put the political leadership in a positive light. This is exemplified by the bombing of the private *Daily News*' premises on two occasions, the latest happening on January 28, 2001. The motive for the bombing was captured in a note left at the scene which charged the paper with being a sympathizer of the opposition party and the white minority. A lot of journalists have been attacked for covering, and therefore giving exposure, to the controversial land occupations. 'War veterans' have reportedly disrupted the distribution of private newspapers in some parts of the country.

To What Extent are the Media Accountable?

It is important that we do not only hold politicians and other state officials accountable, but that those individuals and institutions, such as journalists and the media, who monitor the state should themselves be held accountable for their actions. The failure of monitoring institutions to perform according to democratic norms and in the true interest of society would erode their credibility and, therefore, damage their ability to serve as legitimate watchdogs over state activity. Thus, the mass media, while serving as autonomous agents of accountability, are, themselves, not immune from operating within the parameters of its principles. It is important that the media be held answerable to the various publics that they serve and be subject to necessary sanctions if they stray in the discharge of their responsibilities. In order to analyze the extent to which African media have been accountable, it is important to operational the concept with particular reference to the media.

For the purposes of this discussion, I will draw from the conceptual framework put forward by McQuail (1997) as a basis for defining and analyzing what the term means. This framework assumes that there is a notion of the public interest and that the media are one of the institutions entrusted with the responsibility of protecting that interest and upholding the values on which the society is built. This assignment of responsibility comes with expectations that the media would go about performing their functions in a manner that is consistent with the ideals and values of the societies in which they operate. These expectations provide the standards on the basis of which the media are evaluated and required to answer for their activities. The process of compelling the media to conform to the standards of society and holding them answerable to those standards is what media accountability is about. It is important to point out that compulsion that undergirds and serves as an impetus for accountability takes a variety of forms. It includes, but is not limited to externally-imposed regulatory mechanisms and the attendant use of force by those who control the instruments of coercion, in order to ensure compliance. This type of compliance is manifested in liability suits, sedition charges, etc. Some of these may be used to abuse and intimidate, as shown earlier, whilst others may be used to ensure that the media discharge their responsibilities

appropriately. Compliance could also be premised on certain values and value-expectations that constitute the ethos of particular societies, and could be elicited and enforced through subtle, non-legal, and non-coercive methods. In this instance, accountability becomes coterminous with answerability. "The liability mode is characterized by an adversarial relationship, while answerability refers to the readiness to achieve some reconciliation and resolution of differences. The emphasis in the first instance is likely to be on issues of harm caused by the media, in the second on issue of mass media quality" (McQuail, 1997, p. 517).

It is on the basis of the variety in the nature of the sources of accountability and the differences in the level and extent of compulsion that each of them exerts, that McQuail identifies four types of accountability. The distinction is based on the sources from which the media's responsibilities are determined. In this essay, my focus will be on three of the four sources. These are: assigned, contracted, and self-imposed responsibilities. Assigned responsibilities flow from legal and other regulatory mechanisms which establish the parameters within which the media are expected to function. Contracted responsibilities draw their legitimacy from a common understanding of, and agreement on, how the media will perform its functions vis-a-vis constituencies with which it has a relationship. The relationship could be explicitly spelt out, as is the case with transactions between the media and particular clients. It could also be an implicit compact with the abstract body politic who have a certain expectation of the media as an instrument for education, information, monitoring, and defending fundamental values. Standards of expectation and the compulsion to conform to them could originate from within media institutions themselves as well. Accountability that is based on a self-imposed sense of responsibility refers to those instances where media institutions and professionals, acting individually or as part of a collective body, undertake, out of their own volition, to commit to certain principles and standards of practice to which they will be held answerable. Examples of this type of accountability will include professional codes of ethics or conduct that govern journalists' associations. The last category in McQuail's scheme is that of 'obligations denied'. He defined it as referring to "those instances where claims are laid against the media but are not accepted, with varying degrees of legitimacy" (McQuail, 1997, p. 516).

It is clear from the discussion in earlier sections that the private media are doing a commendable job under trying circumstances. It is also fair, however, to state that the newly found freedom of expression and of the press is being used by certain journalists in ways that border on social irresponsibility. This was the case with three Tanzanian newspapers (*Kasheshe*, *Chombeza*, and *Arusha Leo*) which were banned for ‘their “persistent featuring of pornographic cartoons and unethical articles”’ (MISA, June 24, 1998). By pushing the envelope in this direction, these publications give governments reason to clamp down on the media and extol themselves as the repositories of societal values. As Kasoma (1997:296) opines, because the private press’ ‘recklessness is reaching alarming proportions, Africa’s multiparty rulers are increasingly taking measures to limit press freedom once again.’

As indicated earlier, most of the private press is not really independent. They tend to push a particular, not always objective, political agenda. Berger (1998:605) correctly asserts that ‘rather than [being] ...a free-floating ‘watchdog’, [the media are] located in a nexus of relations, and like the state, [they] ... are dominated by more powerful partners.’ In a free democratic society, there is nothing wrong with that. However, the media’s credibility tends to be called into question, because they present themselves as the disinterested surveyors of the political scene. In reality, their views and claims are tainted by narrow ethnic or political trappings, quite at variance with the interest of the nation which they tout as their motivation and call to service. Citizens, therefore, begin to wonder whether the media are just engaged in a campaign of vilification that would open up political opportunities for them when the current regime is replaced. In such circumstances, they lose their ability to mobilize citizen support for legitimate causes, because their motives have already been tarnished by prior indiscretions.

The manner in which some of these media present their views has stretched the bounds of adversarial politics to the point where animosity appears to define the relationship between the state and the inky fraternity. Personal attacks that bear no relation to the issues being addressed, for example, do not augur well for sustainable democratic tolerance. *The Post*, for example, has on numerous occasions referred to President Chiluba as ‘a fool’ and ‘a bandit’ (Kasoma 1997:301). Lister (1996) notes that in Malawi’s fledgling democracy, the press has used its newly-won freedom to engage in journalism which

approximates to hate-mongering. Takougang (1995:342) also acknowledges that the press in Cameroon has sometimes published 'negative headlines and stories [about government officials] even though they may have been groundless'(See also Sandbrook 1996:84). The acrimony that results from such orientations gives governments cause to accuse the media of embarking on personal vendetta against the government, instead of engaging in a discussion of legitimate political, social and economic concerns.

It is also clear that much of the public is alienated by the extreme negativity which characterizes some of the material from the media. As *The Independent*, a private Ghanaian newspaper, acknowledges:

[T]he way we as journalists continually harp only on the omissions of our leaders and heads of state is perhaps overdone. Praise must indeed be given where it is due. When, for instance, the Minister of Lands and Forestry, Dr Christine Amoako-Nuama, disbanded the National Timber Task Force for turning "themselves into rackets to enrich themselves at the expense of the country", we of the private media ought to have seen it as a positive development and commended her (*The Online Independent*, May 11, 1999).

The new Beninois press of the early 1990s, for instance, served 'much the same diet of scandal and exposure. ...[T]here were few restrictions on the media, and much opportunity for indulging in cynicism, propagating rumour, or - at worst - simply fabricating scandal for payment' (Randall, 1993:640). Such tendencies were once again manifested in September, when the independent daily, *L'Aurore*, alleged without any basis that Osaman bin Laden's terrorist network had connections in Benin. When the media behave in such a manner, they risk losing the attention of portions of its current and potential audience. Consequently, the impact that the positive aspects of their work could engender is lost.

It is an unfortunate commentary on the credibility and integrity of the private media when some of its members compromise their professional ethics for the sake of personal financial gain. In September 2001, a reporter with the state-owned *Ghanaian Times* newspaper allegedly demanded a bribe of C5,000,000 from an Indian businessman in order not to publish a damaging story about him. The businessman had been accused of seriously assaulting one of his Ghanaian employees. When the businessman reported this blackmail, the reporter initially denied the story, and only admitted that he demanded the money when a tape recording of transaction was produced. He argued, however, that the demand was a setup in which the willingness of the businessman to offer the bribe will establish his

admission of guilt in the assault case. Behaviors such as this make it easy for the enemies of the media to accuse them of lacking credibility to hold officials accountable. Furthermore, they deflate the confidence of the public in the media's role as a credible watchdog.

Evidence from Zambia shows that some journalists have admitted to fabricating falsehoods about people in authority, just to tarnish their reputations (Kasoma 1997:303). It is, therefore, no wonder that some observers have averred that the level of truth, in reporting, among the private press is low (Kasoma 1997:299-300; Ansah 1996; Bourgault 1995:223). The sensationalism, hyperbole and peccadillos that characterize reporting by some sections of the press are clearly premised on political calculations. But they are also motivated by a desire to make profits in a market that is getting increasingly competitive. It must be admitted though that, in certain cases, 'the meagre resources for investigative reporting and the reluctance of officials to provide information, produce reportage that abounds with unsubstantiated rumour' (Sandbrook 1996:82).

It is important that journalists obey the rule of law if the concept is to serve as the bulwark of protection for themselves. Where media practitioners engage in wanton violations of this concept, especially in situations where the courts have generally been fair and independent, they serve to undermine their own position as upholders of democratic principles. Various contempt of court convictions that have been handed down in Ghana, recently, have had to do with journalists failing to obey court rulings, hence defying the rule of law. The editors of *The Statesman* and the *Crusading Guide* were, for instance, convicted and imprisoned for 30 days for continuing to 'comment on the civil libel case which was pending before the courts when an interim injunction imposed by the courts, asking the journalists not to publish any more libelous articles on the First Lady was still in effect' (*Joy FM*, Aug. 5, 1998).

There may be legitimate concerns about the laws that are being applied by the courts, but the way to deal with such restrictions is to use constitutional means of changing them, not defying them. 'In a democracy, citizens are free to disagree with the law, but not to disobey it, for in a government of laws

and not of men (*sic*), no one, however prominent or powerful, and no mob, however unruly or boisterous, is entitled to defy them' (cited in Linz 1987:17).

Who Watches the Watch Dog? Exploring Mechanisms for Media Accountability

In this section, I will discuss how assigned, contracted, and self-imposed mechanisms of accountability have been applied in the African setting. As pointed out earlier, assigned modes of accountability are rooted in legal and formal regulatory definitions of acceptable behavior on the part of the media. These definitions provide prescriptive and proscriptive guidelines that media practitioners are expected to observe. There are, for example, statutes such as Zimbabwe's Law and Order Maintenance Act, which prohibits any activity that is construed by the state as being inimical to the national interest. There are also those laws that prohibit publications that 'insult' political leaders, as is the case with the King in Swaziland. In situations where these laws have been 'broken', journalists and media houses have been held answerable and sanctioned. Various agencies of vertical and horizontal accountability (see Schedler et al., 1999) are then given the responsibility to ensure media answerability and to enforce the regulations.

The courts are one such agency of vertical accountability, and have played a major role vis-à-vis the performance of the media. When the *Al-Naba* newspaper in Egypt published a story in June 2000, accompanied by graphic pictures, alleging that a Coptic Christian monk had had sex with several women in a Southern Egyptian monastery, it not only offended the sensibilities of the coptic community, leading to riots and demonstrations. It also attracted legal action on the part of the state. Church officials accused the paper of falsification, denying that the events took place in the monastery. They also argued that the paper showed dishonesty by not disclosing that the monk in question had been defrocked five years earlier. A state security court consequently convicted the "tabloid editor Mamdouh Mahran of undermining public security, publishing scandalous photos, insulting religion, and causing civil turmoil" (<http://www.cpj.org/news/2001/Egypt21sep01na.html>). In another case, in Mauritania, police claimed to be enforcing the assigned responsibility in July 2000, when they seized copies of *La Tribune*, a private weekly, for violating Article 11 of the Press Law. The law allows such action to be taken when

publications “threaten the principles of Islam or the credibility of the state” (MISA, December 2000, p. 17). Perhaps the most poignant instance of media practitioners being held accountable, on the basis of assigned responsibility, is the trial of three Rwandese media personnel whose case is before the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. Two of them are charged with using Radio Television Des Mill Collins (RTL) to incite ethnic animosity and genocide against Tutsis in 1994. The third, who was the owner and editor of *Kangura*, an allegedly extremist Hutu newspaper is on trial for perpetrating similar acts through the paper.

Civil libel suits are also being used to seek redress in circumstances where the media are construed as having breached their assigned responsibilities. In the one-month period, between November and December 2001, the courts in Kenya imposed about Sh50 million on several media organizations for publishing defamatory material against certain individuals (see <http://allafrica.com/stories/200111290083.html>). In justifying the penalties, one judge argued that they were meant to encourage responsible journalism, fair and accurate reporting, and self-examination by the media regarding appropriate boundaries of reportage.

There is a danger with this form of assigned accountability in the African setting. A number of governments who find themselves under the scrutiny of the media have used their control over the instruments of coercion and compliance to interpret the laws in their favor, thereby intimidating and punishing their critics. This has been made possible by the fact that, in the transitional democracies that Africa is forging, separation of powers has not been firmly established and the executive will still tends to hold sway over other institutions of the state. The obvious question then is to whom are the media really expected to be accountable? Should accountability be based on a legitimate sense of responsibility to individuals and groups or should it be dictated by the whims of the powerful? As the following examples will show, on numerous occasions, the latter criterion seems to have shaped the manner in which accountability has been defined and how the mechanisms of assigned responsibility have been applied. In June 1999, Angola’s Minister of Communication, Hendrik Val Neto, “clearly stated that the Angola government was considering ‘resorting to violence’ against [critical] independent media which did not

support the government in its war against UNITA.” <http://www.misa.org/alerts/19990707.angola.0.html>)

The media’s accountability to the public, in terms of providing truthful and objective assessment of the war was not a consideration. The Liberian government suspended the licences of two private radio stations – *Radio Veritas* and *Star Radio*, in March 2000 for “security reasons”. It accused the latter of being an instrument of *agents provocateurs* intent of destabilizing the country, mainly because of the station’s critical reporting and failure to show unflinching support for the government. In July 2000, the government demanded that *Radio Veritas*, a Catholic radio station, limit itself to religious programming, as stipulated in its conditions of licence. The real reason, however, seems to be the station’s critical tone in political discussions, as exemplified by its “Topical Issues’ program. Another instance of assigned responsibility being abused is represented by the actions of Swazi authorities. In May 2001, the Registrar of Newspapers ordered *The Guardian* newspaper to cease publication immediately, ostensibly because it was not registered with his office. The apparent trigger of this order, however, appears to be the paper’s stories alleging some unsavory goings-on in the King’s palace. This deduction is supported by the fact that the Registrar’s position which had been vacant for over forty years was hastily filled the day before the order was given.

Several African countries have established Media Commissions or Press Councils that are authorized to monitor the media’s performance, and address complaints filed against them. These bodies have applied their mandates in a variety of ways to, arguably, to ensure that the media are held accountable for their actions. Benin’s media regulatory body, the High Authority for Audio-Visual Communications (HAAC), condemned *L’Aurore*’s publication which linked Osama bin Laden to Benin, after the government lodged a complaint against the paper. *L’Aurore* consequently retracted the story in another issue. In Uganda, the Media Council registered its disappointment with *The Red Pepper* and castigated the editors for publishing, in the September 21 issue, obscene pictures of school children at an end of term beach party. It reminded the paper that its actions contravened section 4 (a) and 7 (a) of the Press and Journalist statute of 1995, and that they could be prosecuted for that.

In spite of the good work being done by these regulatory bodies, there are concerns that they could be inimical to the expression of free speech, thereby silencing critical voices, if they are not fair and impartial judges of media activities. This certainly is the perception that surrounded the decision by Togo's Haute Autorite de Regulation Audiovisual et de la Communication (HAAC) when it ordered *Radio Victoire* to stop broadcasting its critical public opinion phone-in programs – 'Revue de Presse' and 'Vice-Versa'. The HAAC saw the programs as defamatory, when most independent observers saw them as realistic commentaries on the situation in the country. Concerns about impartiality are behind public revulsion towards the proposed Media Commission in Zimbabwe. This body will have authority to issue annually renewable certificates of registration to all media outlets and journalists. It will also have power to impose fines and refer matters to prosecutors (see <http://allafrica.com/stories/200112030480.html>). Based on the Zimbabwean government's track record in relation to the media, the general belief is that the Commission is yet another tool designed to curb free expression by the media, particularly the independent press. The setting up of the National Media Panel in December 2001, which shows the government's determination to push through such a constraining institution, has not assuaged observers' concerns.

Assigned accountability need not always be adversarial though For the non-adversarial dimension of assigned accountability to exist, however, it is necessary that the vertical and horizontal institutions that oversee the processes of answerability and sanctioning are relatively autonomous. They should have no obligation to do the bidding of any party that is at the center of a controversy or complaint. Examples of these non-adversarial instruments of accountability are independent press/media commissions. I will use the example of the Ghana Media Commission (GMC) to elucidate the discussion here. It is an independent, constitutionally mandated statutory body. It is authorized, *inter alia*, "to take all appropriate measures to ensure the establishment and maintenance of the highest journalistic standards in the mass media, including the investigation, mediation and settlement of complaints made against or by the press or other mass media" (Republic of Ghana, 1992, p. 114). It aims at resolving conflicts in an amicable manner, devoid of the acrimony that characterizes the courts and the perceptions of bias that surround the

operations of commissions which are seen as extensions of governments. On two occasions, in May 2001, the GMC ruled against the *Ghanaian Chronicle*, a private newspaper, for casting aspersions on individuals without any substantive evidence to support the claims. In one case, the paper had portrayed Kwame Pianim, an economic consultant, as an advisor to the Vice-President in the previous government – a government that the consultant is not generally believed to be politically aligned with. The story insinuated, therefore, that Mr. Pianim was “a traitor and a double-tongued person” (<http://www.ghanweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/artikel.php?ID=15521>). In both cases, the Commission directed the paper to render an unqualified apology to the complainants and to retract the stories. The confidence that the public has in the GMC, as a place to go for non-acrimonious restitution and to hold the media accountable, is borne out by the increasing number of cases that are being brought before it for resolution. So far, it has received over fifty cases and has resolved twenty eight of them amicably. It is instructive to note that only two of these have gone in favor of the media, indicating that the media are not keeping to their assigned responsibilities and, as a result, are being brought to account.

The effectiveness of these Commissions is, however, constrained by the lack of authority, on their part, to ensure compliance with rulings and decisions. The Ghana Media Commission, for example, operates on the principle of goodwill and moral suasion in getting parties to comply with consensual decisions that it arrives at, in the process of holding the media accountable. Unfortunately, this has not always been the case.

Whilst these non-adversarial bodies may not have coercive power, the impact of their rulings on the reputation of journalists and media organizations can be significant enough to elicit the kind of moral suasion needed to keep media practitioners responsible and answerable. The issue of reputation, and its corollaries, has a strong relationship to the second mechanism of accountability – i.e., contracted responsibilities.

Contracted responsibility could emanate from a non-formalized, but shared sense of expectations and values regarding what the media’s role and responsibilities should be vis-à-vis their constituents, or it could flow from explicit agreements between particular media institutions/practitioners and clients with

whom they have mutually articulated objectives and obligations. The clients/constituents then hold the media answerable, and sanction them, if they fail to adhere to these expectations or agreements. It is in the former sense that I see a connection between contracted responsibility and the non-adversarial forms of assigned responsibility. When the body politic gets the impression that a journalist/news medium is being unprofessional, based on decisions of the Media Commission, or that (s)he/it is being unjustifiably recalcitrant in taking responsibility for its actions, there is the possibility that the public may impose its own sanctions.

These sanctions could take pecuniary or other forms. The status of the medium or practitioner, as a reputable and credible source of information, could be hurt, if the public is unsatisfied with the quality of, and values underlying, the material that it/(s)he produces. Furthermore, the public may withdraw its patronage of the medium in question, thereby threatening the latter's economic survival. There has, for example, been a significant drop in circulation of Zimbabwe's state-owned newspapers, which can be partly attributed to public sanctions, as a result of the populace's loss of faith in their credibility. *The Herald* has lost more than 300,000 readers in the past 12 months, from 744,000 in 2000 to 430,000 in 2001. On the other hand, the privately-owned *Daily News* has seen its readership balloon from 512,000 in 2000 to 582,000 in 2001, attesting to the confidence that the public has in it (<http://allafrica.com/stories/200112130615.html>). The implications of these actions, on the part of civil society, and their repercussions may provide the subtle means of enforcement that compel the media to be responsive to the will and expectations of the body politics, as well as to observe propriety. It is the concern about the increase in public disapproval of the way the media are conducting themselves in Ghana that necessitated a meeting, in October 2001, between program production managers of radio stations and the Ethics Committee of the Ghana Journalists Association (GJA). They discussed the deterioration in professional standards and the attendant erosion of public confidence in the media. They concluded that "the only means of cutting out the creeping cases lack of professionalism invading the media landscape, is for journalists ourselves to sanction colleagues who go against the ethos of the

profession” (<http://allafrica.com/stories/2001110080621.html>). This is a reference to self-imposed responsibility, which will be discussed shortly.

As is the case with assigned responsibility, contracted responsibility also raises the question of “accountability to whom”? We need to be wary about the possibility of the media being held to ransom by special interest constituents/clients, particularly in those cases where explicit agreements about expectations do exist. This concern is especially serious with regard to those who provide significant financial support to the media, by way of advertising and employment for example. The cases referred to earlier, with regard to the Namibian and Botswana governments withdrawing advertising and patronage vis-à-vis some private newspapers (because they did not toe the governments’ line) are instructive. The power of governments to hire and fire state media employees can shift the latter’s accountability from the public and solely to the government of the day. The pressure for this shift is the subtext embedded in the following report. “Minister Chimulengwende reminded editors of the state-owned newspapers and the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation [prior to the 2000 elections] that as state employees they were first obligated to support the current administration’s policy and views” (<http://www.cpj.org/dangerous/2000/choto/choto.html>). Consequently, the public was denied access to the opposition Movement for Democratic Change’s perspective on issues in the state media. Its commercials failed to get an airing on state broadcast networks (<http://www.cpj.org/dangerous/2000/choto/choto.html>).

These means of eliciting responsibility and compliance, based on the wishes of particular clients is not exclusive to governments. Other actors are not immune from such tendencies either. In December 2001, Jonathan Ball Publishers of South Africa cancelled a contract to publish a book, *Songs of the Cockroach*, by the critical satirical columnist of the *Mail and Guardian*, Robert Kriby. The publishers apparently did not want to be the target of defamation suits, arguing that one of the characters in the book is an anagram for a public figure, whom they obviously did not want to offend. A similar situation happened in Malawi. Here, the December 10 issue of *The Chronicle* did not appear on the newsstands because Designer Printing, refused to print it. The printing company’s decision was based on the fear that an article about the circumstances surrounding the death of a local reggae star, in police custody, could pit

it against the authorities. Of course, the company's decision appears to be shaped by the fact that it gets large contracts from the government, and so did not want to jeopardize those opportunities by giving visibility and audience to an article that was critical of those same authorities. It is important that the media are not cowed into subordinating their accountability to the larger public to the parochial dictates of self-serving clients. Accountability to these clients should be consistent with the principles of the public interest.

The last form of accountability that I look at in this paper is self-imposed responsibility. This is based on voluntary acceptance of certain standards and codes of behavior that govern membership of a professional body or employment in a particular media organization. There are various ways in which self-imposed accountability is operationalized in the Africa. Principal among these are the codes of conduct of journalists associations that provide guidelines for media practitioners and provide for requisite sanctions for non-compliance (see <http://www.ijnet.org/code.html>). Membership in these associations is generally voluntary, and so those who choose to join them have made a personal choice to subject themselves to these codes of conduct. Many of the associations have ethics committees which monitor the conduct of journalists, investigate allegations of misconduct, and mete out sanctions as appropriate. The professional bodies are not only reactive, but undertake pro-active activities to educate and promote ethical conduct by their membership. Workshops and seminars are organized for these purposes, at local, national, regional, and continental levels. In September 1999, for example, a workshop on media ethics was organized in Ghana for journalists from several African countries. It discussed ways of ensuring accountability, professionalism, and independence in the media. The deliberations at this workshop, and subsequent ones in eight other countries the following year, have resulted in a *Handbook on Journalism Ethics: African Case Studies* – a useful resource for media practitioners. Another way in which the importance of professional standards and responsibility is demonstrated is through recognition of those members of the fraternity who epitomize the principles and values of their professional associations.

In addition to the processes put in place by professional codes and standards, media organizations have institution-specific codes of conduct that hold employees answerable for their actions and sanction them accordingly. This is illustrated by the case, referred to earlier, involving the *Ghanaian Times* reporter who allegedly attempted to blackmail a businessman through extortion. The management of the newspaper summarily dismissed him, explaining that it found his “conduct unacceptable and a breach of the Ghana Journalists Association (GJA) code of ethics and Article 25 of the corporation’s collective agreement” (<http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/artikel.php?ID=18102>). As with the other forms of accountability, self-imposed accountability can be abused and/or lead to self-censorship, if it is used to serve the interests of particular groups or individuals, instead of being directed towards upholding principles of professionalism, fairness, accuracy, and independence, as well as fundamental societal values. The need to guard against such abuse is particularly germane in the context of media institutions where the power of employers over employees could result in accountability being interpreted in a way that threatens the very essence of a free press. An example from the Namibian Broadcasting Corporation helps to illustrate this point. In 2000, the corporation demoted Nora Appolus from her position as Controller of News and Current Affairs, because she allowed a story which described Zimbabwe’s opposition leader, Morgan Tsvangirai, as charismatic to air. Apparently, senior government officials, who control the state-owned corporation, were not happy about this, resulting in Appolus’ demotion.

It must be noted that self-imposed measures of accountability that are institution-based, such as the two discussed above, are limited to those media practitioners who choose membership in professional bodies or employment with organizations that are entrusted with self-policing and sanctioning authority. This means that those media practitioners who are not under the ambit of these organizations can only be held answerable through the first two modes of accountability. It is in view of this that the individual’s sense of responsibility and answerability to self becomes important. Media practitioners should also have accountability to self, based on their own values, professional standards, as well as societal norms of what is right. Their journalistic practice and conduct should, therefore, be guided by an uncompromising

commitment to these principles. Such was the case involving two cartoonists working for the Zimbabwe newspaper group. Boyd Maliki of the *Chronicle* and Zenzo Ncube of the *Sunday News* refused to kowtow to their editor's demand that they produce cartoons aimed at disparaging the opposition Movement for Democratic Change. Instead of compromising their principles of fairness and objectivity, they chose to resign from their posts (see <http://allafrica.com/stories/200110230381.html>).

The Media and the Marginalization of Voice:

An informed and responsible citizenry is important for the operation of free media, thereby making it imperative that the media incorporate the, hitherto, peripheralized elements of society into the democratic discourse. For citizens to legitimately take part in the democratic process, it is critical that they have access to knowledge which could serve as a basis for informed participation. One way of getting such information is through the mass media, but that access is contingent on citizen's ability to avail themselves of what the media have to offer and to be able to direct their views through those channels. The paper, therefore, assesses whether the pre-requisites for civic engagement by most citizens, if not all, exist. It analyzes how the socio-economic realities on the continent affect the ability of citizens to access and use the media to voice their views, monitor the state, and hold officials accountable. A class, geographical, gender, and other analysis of the media, based on difference, will provide a more nuanced and accurate representation of whose voice is articulated in the media, who influences decision making and policy via the media or as a result of access to the media, and who has power to ensure that political, economic, and social actors are held accountable. Are views from subaltern urban classes and rural communities reflected in the media's political discourse or does that discourse remain elitist and, hence, advance the interests of a privileged few?

For citizens to legitimately take part in the democratic process, it is imperative that they have access to knowledge which could serve as a basis for informed participation. One way of getting such information is through the mass media, but that access is contingent on citizen's ability to avail themselves of what the media have to offer and to be able to direct their views through those channels. In

much of the continent, however, the increasing cost to consumers of both electronic and print media, the high level of illiteracy, and the large number of newspapers published in foreign languages, pose a huge challenge to access. While the number of radio receivers in sub-Saharan Africa per 1,000 inhabitants increased from 94 in 1980 to 172 in 1996 (UNESCO 1998), the ratio still reveals restricted access to the medium. The situation is even worse for newspapers, where the circulation per 1,000 people in 1996 was only 10 (UNESCO 1998).

The economic crisis of the last couple of decades and the attendant Structural Adjustment Programs have resulted in high inflation, falling real incomes, and unemployment in most African countries. The cost of imported newsprint has also catapulted as a result of currency devaluations and high import duties. The confluence of these factors has led to relatively high newspaper costs and low effective demand for them. In East Africa, the price for a single magazine exceeds the daily wage of most urban workers, and is definitely out of reach for significant sections of rural people (Adagala 1994:5).

The illiteracy rate in Africa was 43.8 percent in 1995 (UNESCO 1998). The figure is even higher if the figure is extended to encompass those who are illiterate in the official languages of their countries (English, French, Portuguese). Most newspapers are, however, published in those languages. Thus, majority of the population is deprived of direct access to information. Part of the reason for the continued skewed dissemination of most publications and programs in the colonial languages, even where some local language ones exist, is the necessity for economic survival on the part of the media. A lot of the media, particularly the private ones, rely on advertising fees to be operational. Since most advertisers target the urban elite, it is not surprising that the media focus on the language of that group (Dare 1996). It is abundantly obvious that most print and electronic media output is consumed by the urbanites. Berger (1998:601) correctly posits that most media outlets in the South are accessible only to the elite. In sum, 'capitalism sets up structural barriers to the achievement of true democracy and true equality among citizens' (Picard 1985:4).

Rarely does one see private FM stations or private newspapers in the rural areas. The few that exist do not have overtly political orientations. Since the private media are usually the 'vanguards' of

democratic tutelage their limited scope, both in terms of reach and language, deprives a majority of citizens of access to democratic discourse. Also, as a result of those factors, much of their content does not address issues that derive from the rural communities. Hence rural views are not reflected to any appreciable extent in the media's political discourse which is pervasively elitist. It is in the light of this reality that the following observation by Lardner (1993:92) is instructive: 'Profound changes may be happening in society but these changes do not always reach the people who could most benefit from them – mostly because of the way the instrument of information is structured and organized. They only find out what the government wants them to know.'³

Relating the question of access to the situation of women, in particular, McFadden (1998:655) contends that the African press is exclusionary of the 'expression, the experience, and the opinion of women.' It can, therefore, not be considered democratic enough. She proceeds to argue that the press demonizes those women who do not fit into the pattern carved for them by the conservative controllers of the media. Furthermore, women are not given the space to articulate their own views and experiences but have their circumstances presented by men who continually reproduce the representation 'of women as mothers and nurturers' (McFadden 1998:657). Adagala (1994:1) laments this marginalization of women in the media's discourse and its impact thus: 'when women are denied the right to communicate their views, opinions and experiences ... they are being rendered powerless in the public and private realm.' The situation is worsened by the fact that the majority of the continent's illiterate population are women. Illiteracy figures among males and females, in 1995, were 33.5 percent and 54 percent respectively (UNESCO 1998). Women are, therefore, not only denied a place in the democratic discourse, but are also unable to benefit from the educational activities of the media, because of the limitations imposed by the foreign languages. Overall, the plight of rural women is the most pathetic, because they epitomize the intersection of poverty, illiteracy, patriarchal subjugation, and rural deprivation. As Stromquist observes, 'women most affected by illiteracy are those who are poor and live in rural areas' (cited in Okunna 1995:616).

Part of the reason for the under-representation of women's views in the media is their small number within media organizations, particularly at higher levels. In east Africa, for example, less than 20 percent of media workers are women (Adagala 1994:10). It is this reality of a subdued voice for women in the marketplace of ideas that has prompted the emergence of various groupings of female-journalists across the continent to champion the cause of women (See Latif 1998:13). One such effort is contained in the Lugogo Declaration of 2000, which emerged from the Gender Training Workshop that was organized by MISA in Swaziland. It calls for sensitivity in covering women's issues, promotion of a Zebra system of representation in media departments (i.e., 50/50), and collaboration between news media and gender advocacy groups.

Accusations of anti-Christian bias are presumably the reason behind the recent administrative and editorial changes that took place at the Voice of America (VOA) Hausa Service, located in Nigeria. The VOA's Director, Robert Reilly, is quoted as saying that "we are aware of the problems (allegations of bias) and are 'paying very special attention' to the Hausa service" (<http://allafrica.com/stories/200112100026.html>). Nigerian Christians are said to have complained incessantly that the station slants its reporting, analysis and hiring policies in favor of Muslims. The religiously motivated riots that have taken place in Nigeria in the past few months have been accompanied by accusations that the media in each part of the country have singled out one group or the other for vilification or slanted reportage in a particular direction, based solely on the journalists' own ethnic and religious sympathies.

There are also complaints that the media tend to stigmatize certain groups based on the nature of their afflictions, and fail to provide them with the opportunity and a safe space to articulate their views with regard to their own situations. One such group is made up of HIV-positive individuals and those living with AIDS. The following critique of the media in respect of their coverage of this group is presented below by a journalist who himself is HIV-positive. The critique is worth presenting in the voice of those who experience such media bias:

If there are two sides to every story, why are the views of HIV+ people so rarely expressed through the media? Sensationalistic and inaccurate media coverage ... and ... compliant packaging of shallow and impersonal official information has driven people with HIV underground. ... The over-simplistic black-white, positive-negative, right-wrong terminology typical of most HIV-Aids communication distorts the complex reality of living with HIV. ... Little wonder most HIV+ people prefer to keep quiet about their status in the hope of avoiding discrimination and paranoia – perceived and real – that is fuelled by the media's representation of Aids and those affected by it (Lush, 2000, p.9; see also Lush, 2001, p. 11).

The Internet and Democratic Participation

The literature is filled with arguments to the effect that Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) have the potential for transforming political interactions among citizens and political authorities in a manner that suggests the empowerment of the former and enables them to influence policy decisions. This 'utopian' view of the relationship between technology and politics also contends that ICTs will become the magic equalizer that allows hitherto marginalized segments of society to participate significantly in the political process. 'Dystopians', on the other hand, have a pessimistic view of the impact of these technologies. They argue that ICTs will just produce a façade of democracy and popular participation because the elite manipulate information technologies to fit their institutional and personal agendas.

The literature is filled with arguments to the effect that ICTs have the potential for transforming political interactions among citizens and political authorities in a manner that suggests the empowerment of the former and enables them to influence policy decisions. This 'utopian' view of the relationship between technology and politics also contends that ICTs will become the magic equalizer that allows hitherto marginalized segments of society to participate significantly in the political process. The invaluable role that communication technologies such as faxes and electronic mail played in the dissemination of information by, and eventual success of, pro-democracy forces in Eastern Europe is widely cited as empirical evidence to support this assertion. Also implicit within this perspective is the assumption that citizen involvement in cyberpolitics will ensure that governments become accountable to the citizenry.

Those who believe in the transformative and democratizing power of the new technologies opine that the speed with which ICTs permit information to be disseminated allows victims of political persecution to elicit extensive and speedy external support for their situation in a manner that is unprecedented. They point specifically to how these technologies have made it easier for human rights organizations around the world to keep tyrannical governments in check. In the past, significant time-lags between the actions of repressive governments and the response of human rights organizations enabled tyrannical regimes to escape international scrutiny. In the view of utopians, the new information technologies have created the enabling circumstances that allow effective monitoring by civil society organizations, thereby making it possible to prevent certain kinds of human rights abuses from taking place.

This paper assesses the nature of political communication and democratic participation in Africa to determine whether these technologies are changing the face of politics on the continent. It will assess the number of people getting access to the large amount of information made available by the internet, and whether these translate into a significant expansion in the categories of those who engage in, and hence influence, the direction of politics on the continent. Particular attention will be paid to issues of information access, the purposes for which most people use the technologies, the relevance of the material gathered and generated on the internet for democratic participation and state monitoring in the African context. I will determine how access, voice, and political power are conflated by differences in economic status, geographical location, educational attainment, gender, and literacy in the dominant language of the technology.

To what extent are the expectations of 'utopians' likely to be realized in the African context? It seems that they fail to take into account the presence or absence of certain enabling circumstances that will allow citizens to use the technologies in the first place. Using the technologies to influence political choices implies that citizens have access to the technologies in the first place. This is not a given, due to a variety of factors. Among these factors are economic status, geographical location, educational attainment, gender, and literacy in the dominant language of the technology. Differences among citizens

in these areas, means that certain segments of society cannot participate on an equal footing in the political process via ICTs.

According to the 1999 Human Development Report, “the fusion of computing and communications – especially through the Internet – has broken bounds of cost, time and distance, launching an era of global information networking” (UNDP, 1999, p. 57; See also Kedzie 1997, p. 34). This glowing picture is far from the reality for a significant number of Africans for whom no bounds have been broken. In fact, for most of these people, there seems to be decreasing possibilities for accessing the technologies as they battle to maintain a minimum level of sustenance in the harsh economic realities that beleaguer them.

While more than 50 million households in the US and almost 50 million in Europe have access to at least one computer (UNDP, 1999, p. 58), the situation in Africa is significantly different. In Ghana, only 1.6 people per 1,000 had personal computers in 1997, compared to 270.6 in Canada (World Bank 2000, p. 266). The small number of those on the continent who have access to the technology are obviously the urban elite. Thus, instead of the technology making it possible for more people to participate in the political process on an equal footing, it is only enhancing the participation of an elite few. This situation effectively excludes the majority of urban and rural dwellers from taking advantage of the democratic potentials of ICTs (See Everett 1998, p. 386). As Galbraith (1994, p. 2) observes, “nothing sets a stronger limit on the liberty of the citizen than a total absence of money.” In fact, while the growth of ICTs is leading to decreasing costs in the North, and hence an expansion in the number of those who can afford the technologies, trends in the African situation are different. Currency devaluation and high import duties on computers, for example, do not allow the benefits of decreasing costs to seep down to the majority of the population in these countries. Consequently, the assertion that declining technology costs have allowed “a diversity of voices and cultures to be aired” is largely unsubstantiated in the African context.

It is important to point out that even within the category of the fortunate elite, access to computers does not necessarily translate into access to the Internet and the presumed possibilities that it offers for

increased democratic participation. There is another hurdle that needs to be cleared in order to participate in this virtual community; that is the means to log onto cyberspace, beyond owning a computer. There are computer owners who cannot enter the cyber world of politics because the cost of doing so is beyond their means. On the average, it costs about \$100 a month to maintain an Internet connection in Africa, compared to \$10 in the United States (UNDP, 1999, p. 62). This is clearly outside the means of most people, including those who might own personal computers. In South Africa, for example, those who use the Internet have incomes that are about seven times the national average (UNDP, 1999, p. 62). It is no wonder that only 0.1 percent of sub-Saharan Africa's population has access to the Internet, compared to 26.3 percent in the United States (UNDP, 1999, p. 63). In sum, the use of the Internet for purposes of political participation will, at best, just replicate the enormous divisions between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' or, at worst, distance and marginalize the majority from the political process even further. Such differences are not limited to individuals but have been found to exist among civil society organizations as well, with a tendency for well-resourced organizations not to share information with the less-endowed ones (See Firoze et al. 1999, p. 17). This restricts the number of people involved in the process of building 'social capital' (Putnam, 1993) which constitutes a core base from which to construct a 'strong democracy'. Social capital accumulation on an inclusive scale connotes civic engagement and citizen interaction beyond a small coterie of economic and political elites. The marginalization of the subaltern classes erodes the principle of democratic citizenship as defined in Dahrendorf's (1990) conception of elementary rights. Implicit in these rights is the necessity of citizens' access to information. It is in view of the imperative of information access that Halloran (1994, p. 183) provides the following warning:

As the information society develops it will not be possible to achieve the goals of citizenship or to exercise the appropriate rights and responsibilities in the absence of information and communications systems that provide the information base and the opportunities for access and participation for *all* citizens. Accountability and responsibility demand that those who espouse development and globalization take this into account.

Another critical variable that needs to be taken into account in terms of evaluating the use, or potential use, of the Internet for political discourse is to assess the kind of material that 'surfers' go to the net for. In the African setting, the high cost of travelling in cyberspace means that individuals who have to

pay for their stay there are more likely to retrieve or send information quickly. They are less likely to engage in extensive and meaningful discourse that is capable of affecting the political process (See Jensen 1998, p. v). Firoze et al. (1999, pp. 12-13), in a survey of Internet use among human rights organizations in Southern Africa, found that there is no proactive use of the technology and that a significant amount of time was used to surf the net without any clear focus. This finding about political activity in the virtual world reflects the view that "most people do not have the time, interest or patience for the grind of policy discussion" in the regular world of politics (Varn 1993, p. 22). In spite of the lure of ICTs, it is unlikely that this fundamental lack of political disposition will change, especially when such change requires financial investments that are not available to most people.

It is also significant to point out the macro-level constraints affecting access to the technologies. A primary focus in this regard is the level of infrastructural development on the continent. While it is generally accepted that the basic measure of access to telecommunications is one telephone for a hundred people, the teledensity in much of the continent is far less than that. This low density is also concentrated in the urban areas, thereby making it nearly impossible for most people to use modems or broadband technologies to access the web, even if they had other necessary variables in place. While studies have shown that "the internet is the fastest growing tool of communication ever" (UNDP 1999, p. 58), and that almost all African countries are now on-line compared to only 16 in 1996 (Jensen 1998), it is critical that we interrogate the homogenizing assumptions that are enshrined in it. A more relevant question is: for whom is the Internet "the fastest growing communication tool"? Without doubt, the response to such a question in the African context confirms that access to ICTs and their use is limited, with large disparities among individuals, countries, and regions. In 1998, for example, South Africa had about 600,000 email users compared to only about 100,000 for the rest of the continent. This means that less than 1 in every 5000 people had access to the technology (Jensen 1998, p. iv). Indeed, there are still people for whom the radio or the television has not yet arrived (See UNDP 1999, p. 58).

It is a fact that about 80 percent of all interactions on the web (graphics, instructions, communication, etc) are in English. This raises concerns about the kinds of people who can participate in

the political discourses that take place on the web and other interactive sites. For the vast number of Africans, who fall into the illiterate category, access to these digital discussions is not autonomously available. It is in this respect that the Human Development Report asserts that "[i]n Benin, for example, more than 60% of the population is illiterate, so the possibility of expanding access beyond today's 2,000 Internet users are heavily constrained" (UNDP 1999, p. 62).

The issue of access is conflated by gender differences in the use of the technology. Estimates all over the world indicate that males dominate the Internet. In South Africa, which has the best developed IT infrastructure on the continent, only 17 percent of Internet users are female (UNDP 1999, p. 62). The reasons for these disparities have their origins in socio-cultural variables which have appropriated the technological realm as an arena for males. The marginalization of women as a result of illiteracy is even worse due to the fact that 50 percent of them are illiterate compared to 34 percent of men (World Bank 2000, p. 233). The delineation, by gender, of Ghana's 1997 adult illiteracy rate shows that 23 percent of males are illiterate, compared to 43 percent of females (World Bank 2000, p. 323). There is also an economic dimension to the relationship between gender and technology. In Africa, for example, men tend to have relatively higher incomes than their female counterparts and are, therefore, more likely to afford economic access to the technologies than the latter.

The Internet, Transnational Civil Society and Empowerment:

Another area where the ICTs-democracy connection is highlighted is in the development of a strong transnational civil society. Such a society, which will be unencumbered by territorial boundaries, will foster solidarity among different groups, combine resources to monitor state actions, and compel governments to succumb to intense pressure from a ubiquitous group of global citizens. As the 1999 Human Development Report notes, in relation to globalization and the knowledge society:

Cutting across the tradition of national communities is the rise of on-line communities, drawn together by politics, ethnicity, interests, gender, work or social cause. Using the network, they fire up debates and rally instant responses, bringing a new lobbying power to the previously silent voices on the global stage. At the same time network communities can forge closer local

communities, providing community information and making local government more transparent (UNDP 1999, p. 58).

This image of a transnational and networked civil society, however, neglects to interrogate certain fundamental questions that are germane if this new political configuration is to be internally democratic and function effectively. For example, who, in these 'cyber communities', have authority to articulate democratic voice on behalf of a people? Do their views reflect the positions of those on whose behalf they claim to speak? Are there particular conditions under which global solidarity can be garnered? Everett (1998), in an analysis of the Latin American context, observes a paradox in the use of the Internet by transnational civil society. She notes that "the issue of who gets to represent 'Latinos' and 'Colombians' is still one of class, power, and access to technology. While the Internet may make self-representation possible for a small elite, it has also made it more difficult for other voices to be heard" (Everett 1998, p. 387)

The same situation seems to obtain in Africa as well, as illustrated by the following case involving the San/Basarwa of Botswana. Some domestic supporters of the San/Bawarwa have been unfavorably disposed to the Internet protests being conducted by international civil society groups to highlight the plight, and compel the government to improve the situation, of these indigenous people. These domestic civil society groups argue that the concerted bombardment of state officials with e-mail protests may, in fact, hurt their cause. This is because the government might become more intransigent instead of cooperative, as a result of the bad publicity it is getting. It is their contention that they know best how to elicit concessions from the government without antagonizing it, something that members of the cyber civil society do not appear to know. The San case is also significant in another respect. It clearly provides an insight into the distancing that characterizes the relationship between the victims of state repression and their, undoubtedly well-intentioned, supporters from the outside. This situation is ironic, because while the Internet is making it possible for transnational civil society to confront repressive governments, they are unable to use the same means to dialogue with those on whose behalf they claim to speak.

Part of the enthusiasm about the Internet is that it will enable citizens to gain access to such information, irrespective of their location. Such a possibility is exciting for local African civil society groups because it will, ostensibly, enable them to effectively monitor and hold governments accountable. To realize this objective, they need to have access to the requisite information about governments and their activities. It is worth noting, however, that access to such information by local groups is limited because over 90 per cent of it is stored and managed in the United States and Europe (UNDP 1999, p. 60). This fact, coupled with the various constraints discussed earlier, means that the remote sources are not available to many African civil society organizations. Consequently, they cannot take significant advantage of the opportunities that those sources and their wealth of information might provide (see also Firoze et al. 1999).

There is an assumption among ‘utopians’ that governments will be voluntarily responsive to the information that is disseminated through the Internet for purposes of affecting decision making (See Varn 1993, p. 21). This overly optimistic view neglects to take into account the fact that most governments in Africa look at the ceding of any kind of power as a zero-sum game to which they are not positively inclined. African governments are therefore not likely to create the enabling environment for the Internet to influence the direction of politics in a way that does not fit into their own positions. For example, there was tremendous outpouring of indignation and condemnation on the Internet over the incarceration and conviction of Ken Saro Wiwa, the Nigerian environmental activist who was critical of Shell’s operations in Western Nigeria. While this cyber-activism contributed in getting the attention of Western governments, some of which instituted sanctions against the Nigerian government, General Abacha ignored all appeals for clemency and ordered the execution of Saro Wiwa and other environmental campaigners involved. A similar lack of responsiveness can be seen in Botswana where the government has not been moved by various electronic campaigns directed at highlighting the plight of the San population. Obviously, “it may be too much to expect politicians and professionals to cede power to people through facilitating electronic interactivity” (Hague and Loader, 1999, p. 10).

It is worth pointing out that there are cases on the continent where governments have been accused of trying to control the Internet so that it does not become a mechanism for destabilizing their regimes or diminishing their power. In Zimbabwe for example, a conflict erupted between the country's Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and the state-controlled Post and Telecommunications Corporation (PTC) over who should have control over the top level domain [ZW-TLD] (Media Institute of Southern Africa 1997). The concern from the ISPs is that if PTC is allowed to control the industry, it can exclude those companies whose services may not be acceptable to the government. This fear is borne out by a case of 'Internet censorship' in Zambia. In this instance, ZAMNET, an ISP, was compelled to remove *The Post*, the independent newspaper referred to earlier, from its website after the paper published a story that drew the wrath of the government (Levin 1996). ZAMNET, undoubtedly, took this step in order to protect its business interests, which could be jeopardized if it was seen as providing the forum for the dissemination of 'anti-government' information. Other countries that control citizen access to the internet in one form or the other include Libya, Sierra Leone, and Sudan (Sussman, 2001, p. 24)..

Optimists of the digital democratic revolution contend that the technology allows citizens to gain access to decision makers through the interactive opportunities that are available and the instant feedback loops that they provide (See Fervoy et al., cited in Everett 1998, p. 389; Grossman 1996). The realization of this scenario, specifically because of ICTs, can however not be assumed. This is because, in both the real and virtual worlds, the decision to respond to, or incorporate the views of, citizens lies with the policy makers and politicians who may choose to be receptive or not. The fact that the Internet allows easier and faster mechanisms for sending in information does not translate into an automatic influence on the political process. In fact, some of the African government web-sites on the Internet have outdated information and do not offer the opportunities implied in the technology (See Levin 1996). In a lot of cases, one is not likely to even get a response regarding an inquiry. Most of these sites are bedeviled by the twin limitations of non-functional e-mail addresses and the technology's inability to change the bureaucratic inertia that characterizes the state apparatus in much of the continent. As Halloran (1994, p.

169) correctly points out, "we need to remember that provision is not the same as use, and that information technology cannot be equated with communication."

To expect a magical response towards the democratizing potentials of ICTs by African politicians, most of whom are not wont to political accountability, will be far-fetched at this time. Consequently, we must challenge the glowing tributes paid to the Internet and its related technologies as the magic bullet for democratization. It is inaccurate to presume that there is an "absence of 'noise' in new communication networks [which] permits the flow of information with fewer ideological filters and allows citizen groups to grasp a more accurate picture of political events" (Chatfield 1991, p. 159). Instead of interactivity between citizens and government, the best that most of these sites offer is a one-way flow of information that might not even be current and adequate. This situation does not support the view that ICTs will make government transparent to the citizenry (Talero 1997; Institute of Governance 1996). It is obvious that, just as in the real world, most, if not all, African governments do not conceive of the citizenry as partners in government (See Richard, 1999). Hence the ICTs as currently available to citizens and employed by governments do not seem to provide the necessary fillip for the invigoration of the democratic process among the mass of the population and in their interaction with government.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Whilst the optimism at the beginning of the 1990s may have been dampened by continuing concerns about impediments being placed in the path of the media, the prospects of the media playing a useful role in holding office holders accountable are still good. They enjoy a large base of support among those who have access to them and, with the necessary operational environment, they should be able to play even more meaningful roles in the continent's democratic future as forums for democratic expression and as watchdogs of the state. As their numbers increase, competition will intensify among them. Consequently, quality, professionalism, objectivity and inclusiveness will attend their operations as these become important determinants of their economic sustainability and continued support from citizens. These developments will have implications for the state-owned media as well. They will be compelled to

become legitimate contributors to democratic discourse if they are to retain a respectable clientele, particularly in this era when government funding is under threat.

It may still be a while before the print media and television become commonplace vehicles for democratic participation for most citizens. The high level of illiteracy makes the former a restricted medium while the high cost of television sets and enormous investments needed for the operation of television stations put the latter beyond the reach of most citizens and private media organizations. Even though state control of frequency allocation will continue to hamper access to the electronic media in general, there is a positive trend in the emergence of private radio, especially FM transmissions. This is a positive trend, particularly since it alleviates the financial and literacy problems faced by television and newspapers respectively. It has the potential to grow faster and to play a significant role not only in disseminating democratic ideas but in democratic participation as well.

A caveat is however in order. There has to be some introspection and change in the media's patterns of operation noted above, if they are not to self-destruct. 'The independent press is both a necessary prerequisite as well as a co-requisite for democracy and multiparty *politics only if it performs its role ethically and professionally*' (Kasoma 1997:297). Such independence needs to be supported by a sense of responsibility, to which the media must be held accountable. It is in the media's own interest to pre-empt impositions on its practice by administrators of assigned responsibility through effective self-imposed mechanisms of accountability. It is also critical that the media incorporate the, hitherto, peripheralized elements of society into the democratic discourse that they churn out. As the example of *The Monitor* in Uganda shows, there are economic and political benefits from giving such groups a voice in the media:

Two strategies were instrumental in *The Monitor's* marketing strategy: diversification by participation and by localization. The result has also been interaction in diversity, especially in the political sphere, between the core polity and the rural periphery.... Newspapers need to shift from the dominant, but often misleading view, which simply equates the democratization role of the media with writing liberal editorials, opinion pieces and political news (Balikowa 1995:612).

The onus for strengthening the role of the media, both private and public, as democratic instruments should, at least, be partially borne by the rest of society. As noted earlier, a free press and democracy are symbiotically related and so mutually reinforcing. Hence, it is crucial that citizens become committed defenders of the democratic dispensation through active participation in pro-democracy civil society organizations. As Frederico Mayor (1996: Preface), Director-General of UNESCO, observes, ‘responsible and informed citizens are the best shield of democracy.’ An active citizenry will help to prevent governmental excesses and breed trust in the democratic system, thereby enabling the private media to perform their functions. Such developments will also encourage practitioners in the state-owned media to be more independent without fear of unfair retribution. Furthermore, citizens have to be the watchdogs of the media, holding them accountable for their actions. This will send a clear message to the media, particularly the emerging ones, that while the public lauds their critical outlook on politics, it does expect them to practice responsible journalism and to maintain professional and ethical standards, and to reflect appropriate societal values. It is the reciprocal relationship between this kind of citizenry and free media that obliges the media to generate and expand their support base through inclusiveness. This should not be limited to dissemination of information across geographical and class lines but should include active cultivation of marginalized groups as equal participants in the media’s democratic discourse.

The findings from the foregoing discussion on the internet also support Ott’s (1998) admonishment to attenuate the utopian enthusiasm about the democratizing impact of ICTs in Africa. There is no denying the fact that the technologies have made it possible for a lot more people to access a lot more information. This fact does not, however, translate into a significant expansion in the numbers and categories of those who engage in, and hence influence, the direction of politics on the continent.

Most of those who have access to the new media are the privileged of society. Marginalized segments of society are still unable to rupture the nature of extant politics through ICTs because of economic, language or other constraints. The evidence supports various observations which conclude that, by and large, the goings-on in the world of cyberpolitics reflect, rather than challenge, what is taking place in the real world (Hess 1996, p. 224; See also Barber, 1997; Carstarphen and Lambiase, 1998;

Everett 1998, p. 388). “We find that utilizations of ‘virtual democracy’ have tended to be relatively conservative rather than transformative” (Walker and Akdeniz, 1998)

Technology cannot be the magic bullet that suddenly causes African politicians to turn a new leaf, embrace scrutiny of their activities by citizens, and incorporate the views of civic groups in policy deliberations. The cost of doing so vis-à-vis their personal interests is too much for politicians to willingly accede to. It is therefore important to resist suggestions such as Kedzie's (1997), which overate the causal links between ICTs and democracy and advocate a position that diminishes the imperative nature of crucial catalysts of democracy such as education and economic development. Without improvements in these areas the democratizing potentials of the technologies will remain a mirage. Without efforts to narrow the access gap in the use of ICTs, and to engender responsiveness on the part of governments, the Internet and its associated facilities will remain tools for producing overwhelming amounts of information, rather than means for genuine deliberative and participatory democracy. In conclusion, I must point out that this discussion of the challenges confronting the use of the new information technologies for the promotion of democracy is not meant to deny their contributions toward the advancement of African democracy. Its purpose is to ensure that we do not further marginalize certain groups in society and give ourselves a false sense that a democratic El Dorado is inevitably around the corner. In this respect, it is important for donors and other enthusiasts of 'electronic democracy' to join forces with skeptics to critically evaluate the efficacy of these technologies in the context of African democracy. Such collaboration will enhance the chances of building democracies that are more inclusive, responsive, and effective than those that the continent has hitherto experienced.

Notes

1. It is difficult to provide a figure that captures the exact extent of change in terms of the number of emerging media. This is because a number of newspapers, for example, have appeared on the newsstands only to vanish after a short period of time due to a variety of factors that are beyond the scope of this paper. The following sources, however, give some idea about the trends in the numbers and variety of the media in Africa: <http://www.uis.unesco.org/en/stats/stats0.htm>; http://www.uis.unesco.org/statsen/statistics/yearbook/tables%5CCultAndCom%5CTable_IV_8_Africa.html; <http://www.crl.uchicago.edu/info/afcurr1.htm>; <http://www.kidon.com/media-link/africa.shtml>; <http://www.misanet.org/links/news.html>; <http://www.misanet.org/links/broadcasters.html>

2. It is worth noting that the international media have penetrated African, and are influencing the way the continent's media operate as well as the world-view of citizens. In view of the harassment of the local media, and the consequent self-censorship that obtains, in some countries, a sizeable number of Africans turn to foreign sources (especially radio) for news about their own countries. This stems from the general perception that these sources are likely to be more accurate and credible than some local counterparts, particularly the state-controlled ones. This is the case, for example, in "Cotonou (Benin) where ... listeners used RFI to the exclusion of the Benin national service because its news service was considered more up-to-the-minute" (Fardon and Furniss, p. 80). Africans are also helping shape the news about their continent by contributing in a variety of ways to foreign programs about their countries. As one BBC correspondent notes, "nowadays, people from all the African countries are constantly sending faxes or ringing to demand to be put on air" (Ohene, 2000, p. 79).

The relatively well-to-do have access to satellite television which provides them with alternative sources of news. The general television-owning public also has access, albeit limited, to some of these foreign television programs. CNN and BBC, for example, are available on some of the local stations and can be accessed during certain times of the day in a number of countries. News organizations like BBC, RFI, and VOA have entered into collaborative agreements with local stations, under which the latter carry the former's broadcasts during certain times of the day, thereby exposing listeners to news and other programs from outside. "RFI ... provided African-centered programmes to national broadcasters to enhance the range of their programming [It] also plays the role of a news agency for the African print media" (Nouma, 2000, p. 77).

The local media are increasingly drawing from the style of journalism in the foreign press, as the example about CNN-like "Crossfire" program in Ghana indicates. It must be noted, however, that not all the influences from the foreign media are considered positive, especially those that have to do with popular culture. There are concerns among many people that African moral values are being eroded in the face of Western cultural influences. Some observers have criticized the television stations and some print media for exposing their audience to material that is distasteful by African standards. The media's rationale for using these materials seems to be due to the low capacity for program production and news gathering on the continent, as well as the desire to reap economic benefits from the attraction that the foreign material generates among a significant segment of the population.

3. This picture should not be attributed to concentration of ownership, but is more the result of the specific imperatives each source of ownership. Generally, there does not appear to be a concentration of ownership within the emerging print media, as various groups and individuals try to find a niche for themselves in what is generally a competitive environment in many countries. There are, however, concerns among some observers that there is an inclination for media concentration in South Africa. Overall, the situation is a bit different with regard to the electronic media. Here the state is still the dominant force, because of a number of reasons that have been discussed in this paper.

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